



Resilience In Focus

Achieve Success by Practicing Mental Imagery

From the Army Resilience Directorate

What is Mental Imagery?

Mental imagery is using our minds to visualize and experience a situation as realistically as possible.

How Does Mental Imagery Work?

Our brain is made up of approximately 86 billion brain cells called neurons, and all of our thoughts, feelings, and actions are the result of complicated connections made among those neurons. For example, when we physically engage in a task, like drinking from a coffee mug, specific pathways of neurons are activated in our brains. The more often that we engage in the same behavior, think the same thought, or feel the same emotions, the more easily those pathways among neurons are activated, the more quickly those neurons connect and communicate. This is how learning and improvement occur. With each iteration of an activity, we strengthen the connections and pathways of neurons in our brains connected to that particular activity. That is, our brains rewire themselves to make the connections they regularly make happen more easily and quickly.

Mental imagery works because when we create realistic, vivid images in our minds of a particular activity or emotional experience, almost identical patterns of neurons are activated as when we actually engage in that activity or feel those emotions in the real world. Therefore, each time we use mental imagery and activate these neural pathways, we are strengthening those connections in our brain.

How Do You Use Mental Imagery?

- **To Rehearse Mentally** –
 - Specific Steps: Mentally rehearse activities step-by-step.
 - Overall Flow: Mentally rehearse in a way that is more holistic and synergistic in which individual movements are combined and flow is maximized.
- **To Boost Motivation** – Imagine what success looks and feels like (e.g. winning an award).
- **To Boost Confidence** – Imagine encountering and then overcoming obstacles you think you might meet when engaging in a task.
- **To Regulate Emotion** – Imagine experiencing anxiety/fear/excitement in a particular situation and then imagine using techniques that regulate/harness that emotion in a way that results in success.

Factors to consider when using imagery

- **Controllability** – the ability to imagine what you want to imagine for as long as you choose.
- **Vividness** – the extent to which the image uses all five senses...and the emotions you're likely to experience during actual, real-world performance.
- **Perspective: First Person vs. Third Person**

- First person: Imagine how you will envision and or see yourself perfect a new skill and practice emotional regulation.
- Third person: Imagine viewing how you will learn or perfect a new skill set through the eyes of someone else.

Resources

[ARD Mental Imagery – Video](#)

[ARD Mental Imagery – Infographic](#)

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